

Speaker's Tips

Tips for Effective Presentations

Here are some tips to make your presentation most effective -- regardless of whether you are meeting with five parents or 100 community group members.

Persuade your audience. Remember your primary goal in most instances is to alert your listeners to the problem and motivate them to take action, support legislation and/or get involved at the community level.

Use statistics well. Round off numbers, making them easier to understand. For example, use "close to half" instead of 48.5 percent, or "four out of five" instead of 80 percent.

Make your presentation personal. Use examples and anecdotes from your own experience to illustrate the facts that you present. People are more persuaded by experiences than statistics.

Present a local or statewide perspective if possible. A problem that hits close to home is more compelling than one miles away.

Answer questions briefly and concisely. You don't have to know everything about this issue to make an effective presentation. If you do not know the answer to a question, offer to find the answer and get back to the questioner.

Show sensitivity to the interests of your listeners. When preparing for a presentation, think about how the particular audience will respond to what you are saying, based on their own priorities. If you show sensitivity to the interests of your listeners, you are much more effective than if you speak only from your perspective as a pediatrician. Community groups will have many parents and grandparents in the audience. They will want to know how this affects or could affect them personally, hits their family directly or anyone else they know, and then they will focus on the impact of their community. Representatives from the business community will focus on the bottom line for their company and employees.

Encourage your audience to become active on the issue. Urge them to inform others and take positive action to address the problem.

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Six Good Ideas

Perhaps the most important -- but most difficult -- aspect of public speaking is keeping the audience's attention. Here are some suggestions:

Speak up! Talk a little louder than you think you should. Most people speak too softly and the result is often mumbling. Speaking up can also make you feel less nervous.

Use illustrations. Force the audience to visualize. The listener's mind is hungry for pictures. Give them something to "see."

Use "first person" stories when possible. The audience perks up for phrases like "The other day I . . . " "I have found from my own experience . . . " "A friend of mine once told me . . . "

Pause occasionally. Pauses are perhaps the most effective technique for regaining the attention of the audience. Most speakers neglect this powerful idea because the silence is deafening to them; however, the pause is welcomed by the audience. Try it and you'll see all eyes looking back at you for your next statement.

Save handouts until after your presentation. If you give people materials at the beginning of your talk, they'll read instead of pay attention to you.

Throw in some rhetorical questions, like, "What would you think if . . . ?" The effect is usually to force people to respond mentally, hence keeping them on track with you.

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How to Obtain Speaking Opportunities

You're fired up and ready to speak... so where's your audience?

Be proactive. Write a “pitch” letter to build relationships with organizations, schools, churches and businesses. Let them know that you are ready, willing and able to share valuable information about an important topic at no cost to them. You may want to subscribe to a local parenting publication, which can be a good source of information concerning opportunities for speakers, such as upcoming health fairs and parent or community meetings. Look for similar opportunities within your own profession. Perhaps your employer or a professional organization to which you belong would help you arrange to make the presentation to co-workers and/or colleagues.

- Once you've obtained a speaking engagement, create a simple flier to promote your appearance. Post it around town and send it to the “Community Calendar” department of your local paper and TV stations. Those departments will print and broadcast upcoming community events at no cost. Ask whoever invited you to speak to assist you with promotion. They can help distribute fliers, and also may have a budget for advertising in the local paper.

Be reactive. Scan the local media for news stories that may relate to your topic. For example, a college student dies after a drinking binge. Call the college (they should already have your pitch letter and be aware of you) and remind them that this is a good time for you to deliver your presentation, because people are already thinking (and worrying) about the issue of substance abuse. Your presentation can empower people and ease their minds. Reiterate that you'll come and speak for free.

Follow up. At the end of your presentation, announce that you have business cards on the hand-out table and that you'd appreciate people passing along your card to others who may be interested in hearing your presentation. Again, state that you'll come and speak for free.

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The Devil is in the Details

Now that you've been invited to speak, you must make sure that no technical trip-ups await you!

Call ahead and confirm location. Make sure you know exactly where the building is in which you'll give your speech, and then make sure you know exactly which room within that building you'll be using. Even if you've received a confirmation letter, call to make sure there were no last-minute changes that could throw you.

Call ahead and confirm equipment. Make sure the venue has provided you with:

- a podium
- a working projector
- a screen
- a glass and some water
- enough chairs for your audience
- a microphone if you want one
- a table for your hand-outs

Also make sure that the room is set up in accordance with your wishes. Generally classroom seating is preferable. A microphone is effective when your audience is large (more than 40 people). If you are giving a presentation during daylight hours, make sure the room has blinds or drapes that will block out light so your slides will be well-seen.

Practice your presentation. Even though you may have a prepared speech in your hands, you must practice it and become comfortable with delivering it. Creating and delivering are two separate things that require two different skill sets. Rehearse in front of friends or family and take their advice on ways to seem more confident and natural. Videotape yourself and study your performance.

Show up at least a half-hour ahead of time. This way any last-minute changes or mistakes won't be so last-minute after all. Become familiar with the room. Practice your presentation. Your comfort level will increase and your performance will improve as a result. If the projector isn't working or there's no podium, you have time to find the equipment you need. When you make those "calls ahead," arrange for someone from the venue to meet you at the room just before the presentation to confirm that you have all the equipment you need and that it all works.

What to do if things still go wrong. Even if you follow all the advance procedures, there's still a chance that things could go wrong during your presentation. Whatever happens, stay calm and keep a pleasant demeanor. If equipment breaks and you can't replace it quickly, continue on with the text and

do your best to describe visuals you would have used. Simply skip over text that relies too heavily on a corresponding slide to be comprehended. If you finish the presentation too early, simply open up the floor to questions and answers or solicit opinions and experiences from audience members and engage in a dialogue on the topic at hand.